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ABSTRACT

The church board movement began to take shape in the U.S. Roman Catholic Church in the early 1970s. This booklet offers board members many suggestions for continual spiritual growth or formation within the context of their governance role, ensuring that the institution is living out its mission, and that their decisions reflect specifically that mission and the Gospel. The booklet states that an organization's greatest source of strength is personal strength: the character, courage, determination, knowledge, and the skills of the individual members of the organization. It states that this theory applies to boards, commissions, and councils of Catholic education. Following the "Foreword" and "Introduction," the booklet is divided into eight chapters: (1) "The Call to Minister"; (2) "Defining Spirituality"; (3) "A Church Model of Decision Making"; (4) "A Spirituality that Supports the Model"; (5) "Discerning Membership"; (6) "Group Behavior"; (7) "Prayer as an Integral Part of Meetings"; (8) "Nurturing the Spirit"; and "Some Final Thoughts." (BT)

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Learners and Leaders: A Spirituality for Board Members.

Mary Benet McKinney

National Catholic Educational Association, Washington, DC.

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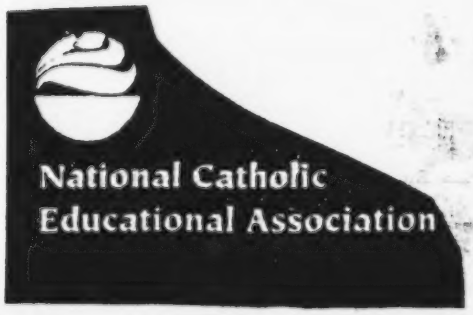
A Spirituality for Board Members

Mary Benet McKinney, OSB, D.Min.



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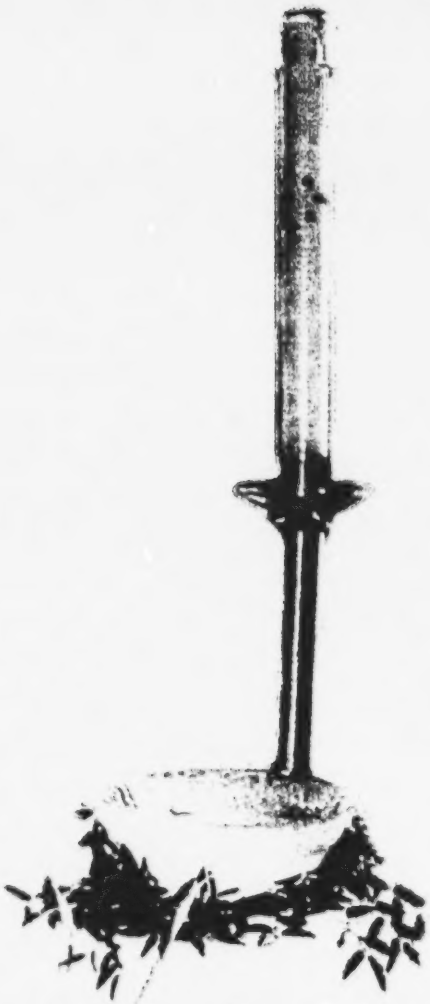

National Association of Boards, Commissions, and Councils of Catholic Education

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Table of Contents

Foreword v

Introduction 1

Chapter 1: The Call to Minister 3

Chapter 2: Defining Spirituality 8

Chapter 3: A Church Model of Decision Making 11

Chapter 4: A Spirituality That Supports the Model 16

Chapter 5: Discerning Membership 27

Chapter 6: Group Behaviors 32

Chapter 7: Prayer as an Integral Part of Meetings 34

Chapter 8: Nurturing the Spirit 41

Some Final Thoughts 43

About the Author 44

Foreword

Following the opening prayer, boards, commissions, and councils usually dive into a full agenda and begin business as usual. The assumption is that the divine assistance invoked in the opening prayer will somehow be evident in the meeting's final outcomes and decisions.

Mary Benet McKinney's book, *Learners and Leader: A Spirituality for Board Members*, offers members many suggestions for continual spiritual growth or formation within the context of their governance role, especially in seeing that the institution is living out its mission, and that their decisions reflect specifically that mission and generally the Gospel. McKinney's book has the potential to assist members to develop a stronger relationship with God. With God integral in their lives, members' personal ability will be enhanced, as will be their quality of leadership and service.

An organization's greatest source of strength is personal strength (Nair, 1994) – "the character, courage, determination, knowledge, and the skills of the individual members of the organization" (p. 90). This theory applies to boards, commissions, and councils of Catholic education. Each member contributes individual strength to the

board's proposals, decisions, policies, and the direction for the enterprise. If the board is to benefit from its collective peak performance or strength, individual members must be provided opportunities to enhance their personal strength including their spirituality. Sister Mary Benet offers many practical suggestions for governing groups to adopt or adapt such opportunities.

Dr. Art DeCabooter
Chairperson

Regina Marie Haney
Executive Director

National Association of Boards,
Commissions, and Councils of Catholic Education

Note

K. Nair, *A Higher Standard of Leadership* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers), 1994.

Learners and Leaders:

A Spirituality for Board Members

Mary Benet McKinney, OSB, D.Min.

Introduction: Why This Book?

The board movement was beginning to take shape in the American Roman Catholic Church in the early 1970s. Those of us responsible for its development recognized it as a way to involve the people of God in the ministry of church, thus responding to what we perceived to be the challenge of Vatican II. The theology to support this participation of all the baptized in the universal call to holiness, mission, and ministry was not yet developed in ways that could be internalized and translated into practice. We had some notion that this broader concept of ministry would enable the church to be more effective in her mission. In those early days of the movement, we lacked the wisdom of the very best teacher: *experience*!

That was more than 30 years ago. We now have the advantage of scholarly studies of the Vatican II documents, theological reflection on the meaning of baptism and church, and the lived experience of hundreds of parishes and thousands of board members to guide us as we seek to carve out the role of all the baptized in the church's mission and ministry. We have come to internalize, in this process, the understanding that all the people of God have a ministry that flows from baptism and that those participating in boards and councils are, in fact, responding to that call to ministry.

No longer do we have the luxury, therefore, of just inviting folks to become board members "to help the school" or "to improve the educational program" or "to be the voice of the parents in policy consideration." Nor can we satisfy ourselves that it is sufficient to provide orientation that includes roles and relationships, familiarity with diocesan and local policies, and group skills. The movement demands more.

What is that more? It is the recognition of and commitment to our understanding of board membership not just as a means for accomplishing tasks, but also as an echo of the invitation of Jesus to all the baptized: "Come follow me!" It is a call to ministry, a call to personal holiness, a call to be about strengthening and nourishing church. Most importantly, it is a recognition that all ministry demands formation.

This book is designed to assist in that formation process. Within these pages the reader will find background material on the theology of the board movement, a process for making decisions in a church model, an overview of the use of discernment in identifying board members and in decision making at board meetings and, most importantly, methods, procedures, and materials for the spiritual growth of board members.

Pastors and staff members responsible for the identification, training, and ongoing formation of board members will find this a useful reference book. Board members will find in it answers to many of their questions about membership on a board, as well as recommendations for their spiritual growth. Chairpersons will be able to use it as they plan their meetings.

This book never could have come together without the experience of 30 years of working with the wonderful women and men who have been such a part of my commitment to bring to life, in some small way, the promise of Vatican II. I offer it as a way to pass on to future board members the wisdom of the Spirit that has graced my ministry in countless ways through so many experiences and holy people.

Chapter 1: The Call to Minister

Jesus has a great deal to say about leadership in the Gospels, especially in the stories after the resurrection when he is trying to push his followers "out of the nest" and make disciples of them. Consider the story of the first Easter morning as John tells it:

> *Mary stood outside the tomb weeping. And as she wept, she peered into the tomb, and saw two angels in white sitting there.... They asked her, "Why are you weeping?" She answered, "They have taken my Lord away, and I do not know where they have laid him." With these words she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not recognize him. Jesus asked, "Why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?" Thinking it was the gardener, she said, "If it was you, sir, who removed him, tell me where you have laid him and I will take him away." Jesus said, "Mary!" She turned and said to him, "Rabboni!"* (Jn 20:11-16)

Upon this scriptural foundation rests all that we do as leaders in the church. Jesus was not just pretending to be the gardener. He *was* the gardener, as he *is* the teachers, students, parents, members of boards, and the pastors that we are called to serve. This basic truth is spelled out in many places in Scripture. At the conclusion of Matthew's Gospel we hear Jesus say: "I will be with you always, to the end of time" (Mt 28:16). And so he is, in many forms. We know

him in the breaking of the bread that we call Eucharist, we hear him in Scripture, and we come in contact with him constantly through the people in our lives. One contemporary scholar puts it this way: "The greatest presence of the Incarnate Lord is another human being." This is the faith conviction that we must bring with us to the task of ministering in church. More about this later. But first, the end of the story.

> *"Do not cling to me," said Jesus, "...but go to my brothers, and tell them."* (Jn 20:17)

Thus was the first discipleship mandate of the resurrection! And that mandate lives on as Jesus says to us, in effect: "You can't stay in your own little world of spirituality. You must go to my brothers and sisters and tell them the Good News. You must model, teach, and call my people. You must *be* and *build* church."

How does all this translate to the task of being a board member? The first obvious answer is that we are to be about more than setting goals, developing policies, evaluating administrators, assessing the needs of our publics, development, and monitoring the budget. While much of what we will do as boards is, indeed, about what might be called the business of our educational systems, it is about more. We are ministers, bearers of the Good News, proclaimers of the Gospel. So the call to serve on a board is a call to deepen our spirituality as well as to share our skills of public relations, visioning, dialoging, and decision making as church.

To comprehend what church is about we must consider her mission and her ministry. The mission of church has been, is, and always will be to proclaim the Good News. That is a constant. It is the *what*. Ministry, however, is *how* the Good News is to be proclaimed, and it changes according to the needs of the time and the guidance of the Spirit. In our post-Vatican II era we have witnessed many such changes. Key among them has been the increasing role of the laity. In his book, *Ministry* (Harper & Row, 1987), Father Richard McBrien writes:

> *It is not enough simply to be a competent, efficient minister. The minister must embody and live by the spiritual values that she or he*

represents, proclaims, and tries to persuade others to embrace. (p. 77)

Unfortunately, it is all too easy for us, priests and laity alike, to forget that we are church. As a result, we get trapped in winning rather than serving, in success rather than holiness, and in tasks rather than Gospel. And, quite possibly, our greatest weakness—we forget to be joyful.

Consider this proven reality: the quality of our ministry is determined by the quality of our spirituality. It will take a good bit of prayer if we are to wrap our minds around that concept. But it is a key factor in this ministry of boardsmanship. I once heard the great spiritual writer and scholar Henri Nouwen say: "My deepest vocation is to be a witness to the glimpses of God I have been allowed to catch." To do that, we must minister out of our prayer.

The mandate to leadership, then, is a call to holiness, to prayer, to spiritual growth, which, in turn, strengthens our faith in the power of the Spirit present to us in Sacrament, Scripture, self, others, and events. To say it yet another way, the ministry of leadership is the activity of being chosen to influence a group to live more fully the implications of being Gospel people.

This is no small task. The church is, after all, of divine origin. But it is also a very human institution. Our structures for ministry are faith models, through which we are asked to believe that the Spirit is present in our own and other's experiences, present in our wisdom and in our gatherings. But the Spirit is also present in our struggles, our weaknesses, and our failures. The very real challenge is to believe that God is even in the messes that we or others create.

This is sound theology, and many Gospel stories support the theory. Recall the first time that Jesus appeared to his apostles. Thomas, for some reason, was not present. When he did get back, they couldn't wait to tell him the Good News. But Thomas didn't buy it, as we see in John's Gospel where Thomas says: "Unless I see the mark of the nails on his hands, unless I put my finger into the place where the nails were, and my hand into his side, I will never believe it" (Jn 20:25).

A week passes. They are all together again, this time Thomas included. Try to imagine the scene. The doors are closed and locked. No one climbs in the window. There is no hole in the ceiling. But suddenly, there is Jesus, standing in the midst of them. It would be reasonable to think that such a miraculous appearance would convince our doubter. It seems not, for Jesus offers the proof Thomas needed: "Reach your finger here; look, at my hands. Reach your hand here and put it into my side. Be unbelieving no longer, but believe." And only then could Thomas reply, "My Lord and my God." (Jn 20:27-28)

What is important is not that Thomas was so slow to believe but, rather, what finally brought him to faith. It was not the miraculous appearance of Jesus, but the proof of his woundedness. The lesson for us? Faith is found not so much in miracles as in weakness.

Consider also Paul's struggle for perfection. I will paraphrase the story as he himself tells it in the 12th chapter of his second letter to the Corinthians. Paul wanted to be perfect. No doubt he figured, as we often do, that if he were perfect, he could do much more for the spread of the Gospel. So over and over again, he tells us, he pleaded with Jesus to make him perfect. The answer was less than encouraging, but Paul kept asking. He finally stopped asking long enough to hear what Jesus was saying to him, and it went like this: "My grace is all you need; power is most fully seen in weakness." Paul knew that Jesus meant: "If I make you perfect and you do wonderful things, people will think that *you* are doing them. But if you remain weak and still do great things, people will know that *I* am doing them. When you are weak, I am strong. When you are vulnerable, I am visible."

That's a lesson we must all struggle with. Weakness is not something to hide, to deny, or even to compensate for. In the history of church, weakness and failure have been a constant. And we see it all around us today. This human institution we call church is far from everything we want it to be or think it should be or try to make it. Mistakes are made, scandals happen, injustice is perpetrated, truth is twisted. But the church goes on. How? Why? Power is most fully seen in weakness.

This is not an excuse to be less than we can be as we seek to present the loving, caring Jesus to the world. But faith and history support the awesome fact that people believe and are saved not by being great and good, but by seeing how frail and vulnerable we are. To embrace this humbling truth is to free ourselves and others to minister according to the mind of Jesus.

Why make such a point of this? Because it is so very easy to get discouraged or disenchanted when we minister in church. We discover the politics, the competition, the injustices, even the scandals that make up the inner workings of church. Perhaps we even find ourselves getting trapped in such unhealthy situations. But we also claim our own limitations, recognizing the consoling fact that God works in and through our weakness, and shines through our brokenness. Many years ago there was a popular slogan: God writes straight with crooked lines. It is equally true that God shines through cracked pots. And we are countless!

For Your Reflection

- What does it mean to you that membership on a board is a call to *both* service and personal spiritual growth?
- Consider the statement: "God shines through cracked pots."
- What is your personal experience of human weakness in your own life, and in church? What might help you to find God in the struggles and limitations of self and others, and in the imperfections of church?

Chapter 2: Defining Spirituality

Spirituality is a broad concept. It might be defined as a way of life that flows from our recognition of the Spirit who lives life with us. Spirituality is nurtured in the soul, but it has a social and public dimension as well. The *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* (#21) tells us that as Christians we enter upon the spiritual life in response to the Word of God, which is then proclaimed and celebrated in the liturgy of the church. And in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (#10) we read: "From the liturgy, therefore, and especially from the Eucharist, as from a fountain, grace is channeled into us; and our sanctification in Christ and the glorification of God, to which all other activities of the church are directed as toward their goal, are most powerfully achieved." It is our spirituality that makes all of life significant and sacred and full of meaning.

To unpack the meaning and implications of spirituality, it helps to think of it as a call to growth and ongoing development, a call to conversion. In her book, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily* (Harper & Row, 1990), Joan Chittister, OSB, writes:

> *Spirituality is an attitude of mind that we must develop.... What makes the spiritual life so different from any other life? What are we doing that is so different from what everybody else is doing? The*

> *answer is, it is not what we are doing at all that makes the spiritual life different from the life lived without consciousness. The answer is, it is what we are and how we do what we do that is the mark of the spiritual life.* (p. 164)

Speaking of growth in the spiritual life as an experience of conversion, Father McBrien has this observation in his book *Ministry*:

> *Conversion is a radical transformation, from which follows, on all levels of life, an interlocking series of changes and developments. What once had gone unnoticed becomes vivid and present. What had once been of no concern is now of the highest importance. There is a change in oneself, in one's relations with others, and in one's relations with God.... One's direction is altered, one's eyes are opened, and one perceives a new world in a new way. Indeed, one perceives a new world, the Kingdom of God.* (p. 81)

McBrien goes on to explain that conversion is both an act and a process. It is a once-and-for-all commitment, made by us or for us at the time of our baptism, but it is also an ongoing, life-long journey. It is this journey into spirituality that board members are challenged to embrace. It is this commitment to conversion that makes of us ministers of the church.

This understanding of board membership as a call to holiness, a call to conversion, a call to minister to the people of God, places a serious burden on those responsible for board development and an equally serious burden of commitment on those who accept membership on a board. Identification of board members must be more than a political process of voting. It must begin with an adequate orientation of potential board members so that they will know what will be expected of them. To delay this orientation until after the board members are in place is hardly fair. Discernment of gifts as well as exploration of skills must be part of the orientation. Ongoing formation is equally important. The continued nourishment of the spiritual dimension of board work will give board members the time and opportunity to pray together, to reflect on the Scriptures, to share faith, and to celebrate Eucharist. An annual retreat or day of reflection must be just as important as a time set aside to develop next year's goals or the annual budget.

For Your Reflection

- Consider how board members are selected for your board.
- Does this seem to be an adequate method? What adjustments might you want to initiate?
- As a board member, reflect on your own needs for spiritual growth and conversion. How might membership on a board contribute to your needs and desires?
- What opportunities does your board have to pray together, to reflect on Scripture together, to share faith, and to celebrate Eucharist? Do you recognize the importance of such activities? Are you willing to take an active part in these things that will contribute to the group's spiritual growth?

Chapter 3: A Church Model of Decision Making

A good place to start is to put spirituality into the context of the purpose of a board. While there may be a variety of nuances in defining the roles and responsibilities of local boards of education, basically they are about assisting in the process of decision making. It is helpful, therefore, right from the start, to make the connection between baptism and decision making in a church model.

Such a model was operative in the early church as we see it portrayed in the Acts of the Apostles. Decisions were made in collaboration with the believers. The presence of the Spirit was respected in all the baptized. The fulfillment of Jesus' promise in the Gospel of Matthew to be with us whenever we gather was experienced and trusted. It is difficult to forget the awe with which Peter spoke as he declared, "It has seemed good to the Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28).

How are we to capture and practice that faith approach in the task and challenge of being board members? By an understanding of and commitment to the philosophy of shared wisdom as a church model of decision making.

Thirty some years ago, as boards were just developing, we didn't have much experience of lay involvement in church, especially at

the level of any kind of decision making. How were boards to arrive at the recommendations they were asked to make to pastors and principals? We turned to the only model we were familiar with: parliamentary procedure. It proved inadequate right from the start. Somehow, although the call for the involvement of the laity had come directly from the Vatican II council, we missed the critical concept that what we were about was church. But we soon found that this secular model of decision making didn't fit our Gospel values. We didn't realize it right away. Instead, we kept trying to make it work. It was as though we were determined to baptize this secular model. But Roberts and his rules refused conversion! The waters of baptism rolled right off. So we attempted to bookend our meetings with prayer. But they erupted in the middle! The problem? The expected and accepted atmosphere of parliamentary procedure, that is, the competitiveness, the win-lose results, even the behaviors of control, were not doing much to foster Gospel values or model the Christian educational communities we were attempting to serve. This was no one's fault. It was all part of the process of finding new ways to be and to build church in our times.

As we look back on the pain and confusion of those years, one wonders if the new model developed as much out of frustration as it did out of study and prayer. What is clear is that it evolved from the lived experience of many dedicated people who sincerely wanted to respond to the call of the council.

The shared wisdom model proposed here flows from Scripture. In Matthew's Gospel, we hear Jesus' promise to be with us always. It is the promise of the coming of the Spirit, the promise of baptism. The followers of Jesus were to be "inspirited" with his presence. Always.

From this promise comes the incarnational theology that identifies our God as the God of our lived experience and the God of our gatherings. Our God is a personal God who is present to us even at those times when we are not aware of that presence, a God who cares, calls, touches, challenges, affirms, and loves us in and through all that we call life. Being attuned to that presence and reflecting on our experiences results in wisdom, the wisdom of the Spirit. So, as we gather, we each have available to us "a piece of the wisdom." No

one has it all; that's called being God. But we all have a piece. Each of these pieces is different because we all live different lives. The philosophy of the shared wisdom model simply recognizes that to the degree we can share all these different pieces and allow them to interact, we will come closer and closer to the wisdom that God wants to share with any group at any given time.

No one wins. Everyone shares. Everyone listens to all that is shared, not to refute but to learn. Everyone lets go of his or her personal wisdom and allows it to become a part of the total wisdom available to the group. The group comes to trust that God speaks in a great variety of ways: through Scripture, tradition, lived experience, personal imagination, study, prayer, and dialogue. And, ultimately, the group arrives at a consensus decision that reflects the many pieces of wisdom that have been shared.

Sound like a bit much? Not really. In recent years I have developed a way to make this concept very concrete. Think of it as making a pot of vegetable soup. The first step in this culinary project is to get everything ready. Brown the meat, peel and dice the various vegetables, gather whatever spices or herbs are to be added, and fill a pot with water. Everything goes in. Turn on the heat and allow it to come to a boil. Obviously everything that is put into the pot has to remain there for the entire process. As soon as it reaches a boil, decrease the heat and allow the mixture to simmer. The simmering goes on for quite a time because it is during that time that all the ingredients somehow take on flavors from each other. No carrot, for example, cooked by itself, will ever have the flavor of a carrot cooked in a pot of soup. When the soup seems to be done, it is important to test it for flavor by tasting it. Does it lack anything? If so, that ingredient should be added and the boiling and simmering allowed to continue. Eventually, the soup is ready and all that is left to do is to enjoy it! It has taken time but the reward is well worth the effort and time spent preparing it.

Now we return to the shared wisdom model. Step one is the preparation. As for any meeting, there must be an agenda that is well prepared, backup materials that will be useful, any appropriate committee reports, and the minutes of the last meeting — all sent to the members at least five days prior to the meeting. Equally important is

the sense of responsibility with which each member receives and studies these materials before coming to the meeting.

The board meeting is the pot into which everything goes. The key word here is *everything*. All wisdom must be collected, without debate or argument or questioning. As all listen attentively, each person shares his or her wisdom on the topic being considered. If some folks claim they have no wisdom to share, we should gently remind them that wisdom comes from lived experience and encourage them to speak out of theirs. Once everyone has spoken, the fire of the Spirit is turned up and the time for discussion, clarification, argument, and debate has come. The point of the discussion is not for folks to prove their point or win an argument, but rather to make an honest attempt to see how all the different pieces might fit together and contribute to the final decision.

When it seems that all the shared wisdom has been considered and discussed, it is time to let it all simmer. Unfortunately, this is the step that most often gets ignored, but without it we do not make good soup! Simmering time is prayer time. Remember that it is God's church we are building here. It is reasonable, therefore, to presume that God wants to be part of the equation. The question often asked is, "How long must it simmer?" That will depend on the issue. A relatively simple decision may require only five or ten minutes of silent reflection time as the group remains at the table. A more complicated issue may mean that no action will be agreed upon until the individuals have had much more time to prayerfully reflect on all that has been shared and to assimilate the new wisdom each person has offered. Once that happens, and the fruits of this time of reflection have been shared and discussed adequately, it is time to test for flavor. This is done by a simple consensus test. A summary statement is made that seems to reflect the thinking of the group. Then each person states his or her agreement or disagreement with the statement. If one disagrees, a reason should be given. This will indicate if anything is missing, and the group will determine what else must be done before it is ready to make a final decision. Ultimately a consensus decision will be arrived at that will make it possible for the group to say with Peter, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Ac 15:28).

One other word on this model. There will sometimes be issues beyond the knowledge or lived experience of the members of the board. This is when the board turns to others for consultation. Such broadening of the base of wisdom must be done with faith in the Spirit who lives and moves within the faith community with its diverse gifts and charisms. The board gathers the wisdom of the wider faith community — teachers, parents, expert educators — and adds their wisdom to the pot of its own wisdom. It boils and simmers as part of the process. The added flavor will make for a wiser, more grace-filled final decision.

For Your Reflection

- This model, which is based on the ancient church tradition of discernment, demands personal discipline and a willingness to listen and to learn. How willing am I to share my wisdom? To set aside my own hopes and desires and really listen to the wisdom of others? To change my mind when given credible reasons for doing so?
- What adjustments would be needed in the way your board conducts its meetings if you were to commit to a shared wisdom model?

Chapter 4:
A Spirituality That Supports the Model

We read in the Book of Proverbs:

> *My (child,) if you take my words to heart and treasure my commandments deep within you, giving your attention to wisdom and your mind to understanding, if you cry out for discernment and invoke understanding, if you seek for wisdom as for silver and dig for her as for buried treasure, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and attain to knowledge of God.* (Pr 2:1- 5)

This is the spiritual attitude we wish to commit ourselves to as members of boards and ministers of the church. Spiritual writers throughout history have called it discernment as a way of life.

The place to start, then, is with an understanding of discernment. It is a gift of the Spirit and a tradition that comes to us from the apostolic church. It has taken many twists and turns as it has evolved from the First Council of Jerusalem to the desert mothers and fathers of the second and third centuries, through the development of many religious communities, and into our own time through Vatican II and the renewed interest in spirituality nurtured by that council.

What is discernment? There are many ways to define it. Here are just a few:

- To separate or distinguish good from evil
- To find the authentic and valuable and to recognize the counterfeit
- To see the heart of the matter with spiritual eyes, from God's vantage point; to see beneath the surface and beyond the immediate and transient
- To make choices that correspond as closely as possible to objective reality, that are as free as possible from inner compulsions, and that are closely attuned to the convictions of our faith
- To discover God's deepest yearnings

All of these are valid definitions. But my personal favorite is the last one: seeking to discover God's deepest yearnings for us. It is awesome to realize that God does, indeed, have yearnings for us! And the "us" can be personal or communal. So this spirituality can apply to our own lives, our families, our parishes, our boards and councils, our church, our world.

Our choices give shape and direction to our lives and to our ministry. This is no small responsibility. Discernment offers us a way of making holy choices, a way of following the lead of the Spirit in the decisions we make. Discernment is not just a theory. It is a concrete way of dealing with the questions that confront us, and enabling us to make wise choices that will positively affect our lives and the lives of others.

In his book on discernment, *Listening to the Music of the Spirit* (Ave Maria Press, 1993), David Lonsdale, SJ, writes:

> *Discernment engages us in the dance to the music of the Spirit. It puts us in touch with the Spirit of God ... who invites us to cooperate in the creation of a world made in the image of God.* (p. 29)

If we are to be discerning people, we must learn to listen to the voice of our God present to us in prayer, in Scripture, in our hearts, in the lives of others, and in the events of each day.

Wisdom comes from life. It is out of our lived experience that we come to recognize the God who walks the journey with us. Unfortunately, this is not an automatic understanding. We can easily miss the lessons of life, miss the God who is always present, calling, car-

ing for, and teaching us. It is so easy to live life on automatic! We are so busy about so many things. In her book, *Reflective Living: A Spiritual Approach To Everyday Life* (Affirmation Books, 1983), Claire Brissette makes this observation:

> *To some extent, each of us tends to live in a state of wakeful sleep, more or less consciously going through the motions of our everyday life and experience. Rarely do we take the time to get in touch with and to reflect upon the deeper meanings of our experiences. We tend to feel that such reflection is simply a waste of time.*
>
> *Yet the potential for reflection is rooted in our nature. Each of us has the ability to touch the deeper meanings of our experience. Through reflection we glimpse something of the mystery of life, and as a consequence our lives are enriched. Daily activity ceases to be monotonous, and reflective dwelling opens our eyes to the wonder hidden in the most insignificant experiences....*
>
> *The common ways of Christian living such as personal prayer, periods of silence and solitude, spiritual reading and retreats are time-tested structures that foster within us growth in a reflective attitude. They lead us toward a deepening relationship with God. However, it is not sufficient that these common ways be highly encouraged by the church.... Nor is it enough for us to know that we need silence and solitude, prayer and reconciliation, in order to be effective. These common ways must become our own.* (p. 21)

All of this sounds great and hardly can be denied. But how to find the time? How to know what to do or where to do it? The good news is that it's not as hard as it may seem. The challenging news is that it does take commitment and discipline.

To allow the Spirit who dwells within to touch and to form us, we need to process our daily lives. Granted, we will do this according to our own unique personalities and lifestyles. But whatever those variables, three things are needed to keep us alert and aware of what God is doing in us and with us. They are:

- Prime time
- God space
- An appropriate method

Prime time. As in any meaningful and healthy relationship, time is a factor. We need some daily time to "be with" God, to ask the questions and to listen to the answers about the events of each day. And it needs to be prime time. It need not take a lot of time, but it shouldn't be just "left over" time. God deserves better. Prime time will be different for different people. It's that time of the day or night when we are most alert, alive, attentive, when our heads work best. Are you a morning person? Then your prime time will be in the morning. Are you a night person? Your prime time will be at night. Whenever it is, you will need to make the effort to give yourself and God 10 to 20 minutes out of every 24 hours. One spiritual writer comments that there never will be time to pray. We must carve it out. So, go carve!

God space. Next is God space. That is a place where we can truly be alone, in quiet — without TV, computer or phone, or any other distraction. A challenge, but an important one to take up. We live in a world of almost constant noise. It is very difficult to hear that "small, still voice" of God in the midst of our normal chaos. We must search out a place of solitude. It might be a room in the house, the outdoors as we jog or walk the dog, a church or chapel, even our car if we travel alone.

So, what do we do during our prime time in our God space? We simply ask the question, "God, what have these last 24 hours been about? How have you touched me, spoken to me, challenged me, loved me?" And then we *listen*. And we trust God to answer our questions, to speak the Word in our hearts, to put the wisdom of the Spirit in our minds — to enlighten, challenge, and console us.

An appropriate method. How is this determined? It is different for different folks. If you are an introvert, you think while you think. If you are extrovert, you think while you talk. This makes a difference in how you speak and listen to God! Most introverts can center themselves in the presence of God, think what they need to say, and "hear" with the ears of their heart what God has to say back to them. Most extroverts have a hard time with that approach. They need to talk out loud to God and to hear God talk back to them (even if it's their own voice making the sound). Or extroverts can write

their dialogues with the Lord. So it is that many extroverts tend to be faithful journal keepers, while most introverts find it more of a distraction than a help. It matters not how we do this conversing with God. But it matters a great deal that we do it in a way that works for us.

Lest we miss the point: Why do we process our daily lives? We are in touch with our lived experience and so in touch with the presence of the Spirit in our lives. It is from this attentiveness that we gain wisdom and bring wisdom to the board table.

That, however, is not the only source of wisdom available to us. We have the Word, especially the Scripture readings assigned by the church for daily use. These readings from the Old and New Testament have so much to teach us. But, again, we must learn to listen!

There is an ancient form of scriptural reflection called *lectio divina* or holy reading. It is a way of allowing the Word of God to touch our deepest selves and to make a difference in our lives. *Lectio* is a slow, meditative reading. It consists of reading calmly the holy words, repeating them with conviction and simplicity, lingering over them, finding joy in them, tasting them, internalizing them.

Writing on this topic, Joseph Chu-Cong, a monk of St. Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts, observes in his book *The Contemplative Experience* (Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999):

> *In recent years, as the contemplative spirit has emerged so strongly in the church, this practice has grown far beyond the walls of monasteries and is being widely offered and taught as a way of opening ourselves more and more deeply to the power of this living Word. It is essential to assimilate the words in the silence of our heart. Only by doing so will we be able to integrate the Word of God with our life and to place our total being at the disposal of the Spirit.*

The Word of God, Scripture, is the filter through which we are invited to view our world. Praying the Scriptures moves us to reflect on the daily events of our lives in the light of the Gospel. It is bringing to bear the mind of Christ on the happenings of our lives. The Scriptures teach us that the function of prayer is not to change the mind of God but rather to change our own minds, to enable grace and wisdom to break into our hearts and heads.

How easily we make God into our own image and likeness and then make decisions out of that self-serving image! This leads us to pray for what *we see* as good for us as individuals, as board, as parish. Praying with Scripture is a protection against such a self-centered, even self-righteous approach. Consider the following passages:

"Speak, Lord, your servant is listening." (I Sam 3:9)

"I am the Lord's servant, may it be as you have said." (Lk 1:38)

"Father, if it be your will, take this cup from me. Yet not my will but yours be done." (Lk 22:42)

Praying these words with the boy Samuel, with Mary, and with Jesus leads us to a very different stance. We come to pray not so much for what we want or think is best but, rather, to know, as individuals and as a board, God's deepest yearnings for us and for our ministry. Such prayer makes available to us the wisdom of God.

In chapter 50 of the book of Isaiah, the prophet tells us that the Word of God is creative, energetic, enlightening, fruitful, life giving — thus enabling us to read the circumstances of everyday life through the lens of God's wisdom. Faithfulness to scriptural reflection, which is another name for *lectio*, allows the Word of God to form and guide us, and to play an important part in ensuring that the Spirit guides the decision making to which we are committed. It is important to pray for such guidance in preparation for meetings and during the meetings themselves. A paraphrase of a portion of chapter 9 of the book of Wisdom is just such a prayer:

God of mercy,
grant us wisdom,
send wisdom,
who is always present with you,
who understands what is pleasing to you,
to be with us
and to work with us.
May wisdom guide and protect us
in all that we do.
Amen.

Before exploring more deeply how this discerning stance works in decision making at board meetings, let us first bring together the principle of processing life and *lectio*. We find in Revelation 10:8 the mysterious command to "take the scroll which is open.... Take it and eat it; it will turn your stomach sour, but in your mouth it will taste as sweet as honey." If we unpack these words we have the formula for *lectio*.

Step One: Take the scroll which is open.

Select a passage of scripture that lures you, that wants to tell you something.

Step Two: Eat it.

Read it slowly, perhaps aloud, maybe over and over. Enjoy it. Savor it. Let it be as sweet as honey in your mouth.

Step Three: Swallow it!

Ask: what is this passage saying to me?

Calling me to?

Is there a bitter side to it that I'd like to deny?

Be open even to the unpleasant, the frightening, the demanding.

Step Four: Respond!

What am I to do about this?

Be specific and realistic.

How about a few examples? Using the Gospels and other Scripture readings that occur in the readings assigned for the celebration of the Eucharist, we will discover how they might "speak" to us and impact our lived experience.

On Friday of the fifth week of Easter, the Gospel is John 15:15-16. In part, it reads:

No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what the master is about. I have called you friends, because I have disclosed to you everything that I heard from my Father. You did not choose me: I chose you. I appointed you to go and bear fruit.

So, "open the scroll" to this Gospel reading. "Eat it." That is, read it slowly, maybe more than once, out loud if that helps. Enjoy these words as words of Jesus spoken to you. As you read, ask yourself, "What appeals to me? Challenges me? Raises a question for me?" Then "swallow it," that is, chew on it, let it sink in and become a part of your thinking. Then talk to the Lord about it and *listen* as the Lord responds, trusting that it really is the voice of God you hear in your imagination. Your dialogue with the Word might go like this:

You speak:

It is something of a new idea that you have chosen me to do something special for you, Lord. I guess I usually think of it the other way around, that you do so many things for me, like giving me life and wonderful people to be part of my life, good health, happy relationships. Granted, a few hard times are a part of it but you somehow get me through those and even teach me something in the process. So here you are telling me that it works both ways. What, Lord, do I have to give to you or to do for you?

And the Lord answers:

True. I, your God, have gifted you in many ways. But I have also chosen you to be my presence in your world. When you were baptized, my Spirit came to dwell within you, to remain with you, to walk the journey of your life with you. That's the "chosen" part. The "bear much fruit" is about how you live your daily life. The way you care about others—relate to them, put up with them, show mercy, kindness, patience to your family, your colleagues, your neighbors, those you enjoy and those who annoy you—is the way you are my presence to them. It is how I can touch with my love every person whose life you touch. That is the mission I have chosen for you. Will you accept it?

And you respond:

It doesn't sound that complicated.

The Lord agrees:

It isn't. But neither is it always the easiest thing to do! But I am with you always to guide and strengthen you for the task.

On Thursday of the second week of Advent we read from Isaiah 41:13:

For I, the Lord your God, take you by the right hand and say to you, "Have no fear; it is I who help you."

It's just a few weeks before Christmas. There are countless demands on your time and your energy. And tonight there is, of all things, a school board meeting. As you read this passage, your first thought might well be:

Well, Lord, you may just have to take me by the hand to get me to that meeting! There are so many other things I could be doing with those few hours.

The Lord answers:

But I'm expecting you at the meeting. So, let me take your hand and lead you not only to the parish meeting room but also through the agenda. Share your own wisdom and be willing to listen to the wisdom of others. Seek to discover me in the gathering, speaking through the lived experience of all the board members.

You respond:

Even Joe, who never seems to make much sense?

The Lord agrees:

Even Joe! Listen to him with the ear of your heart! Maybe he will have something worthwhile to offer tonight.

On Tuesday of the 27th week in Ordinary Time, the Gospel is Luke 10:38-42. It goes like this:

While they were on their way Jesus came to a village where a woman named Martha made him welcome. She had a sister, Mary, who seated herself at the Lord's feet and stayed there listening to his words. Now Martha was distracted by many tasks, so she came to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to get on with the work by myself? Tell her to come and give me a hand." But, the Lord answered, "Martha, Martha, you are fretting and fussing about so many things; only one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen what is best. It will not be taken away from her."

This, like so many of the Gospel stories, is very familiar. We know how it ends as soon as we read the first line or so. And, quite likely, we know how we feel about the situation and the Lord's response!

One of the problems we face as we try to live into the Scriptures is that we don't expect to be surprised. So, we approach this story with little hope that any new thought will come. The dialogue might go this way:

> *Right! Mary has chosen the better part! So, who does the dishes, cooks dinner, goes shopping, drives the kids to school and basketball practice and dancing lessons? Who makes the money, helps with homework, goes to parent teacher conferences? The better part, indeed! I'd love to choose just a few hours a week, or even a month, for that better part!*
>
> *So, you don't like this Gospel?*
>
> *No, Lord, I never have.*
>
> *Maybe it's that you never understood it.*
>
> *Try me.*
>
> *I was not criticizing Martha for being a "doer." Nor was I affirming Mary for not helping. I was trying to say that there are times for doing and helping and times for just being. I had not come to their home to be fed, although a good meal from Martha's kitchen was always welcome. This time I came simply to be with them, to rest peacefully in their presence, to speak with them as a friend. I loved them and enjoyed just being with them. So it is with you. I love you and I enjoy just being with you, even if it's just for a short time. So, carve out 10 minutes or so from your very busy day and just be quiet in my presence. Let me love you, speak tenderly to you, hold you close to my heart.*

Don't panic! *Lectio* is not so much a skill to be learned, as it is a gift to be received — if you will allow yourself to be open to the Spirit. You may find yourself doubting that it really is the voice of God that you are hearing. Trust! God does speak to us through our imaginations. Just let yourself be quiet and *listen*. And be at home with God as you would be with a friend or a spouse. If you don't understand something, say so. If you don't like something, complain. If you hurt, cry. If God's answer is funny, laugh. Most important, stay with it. God wants to talk with you. God wants to be a vital part of the equation of your life!

So, what difference will this prayerful approach make? A willingness to approach membership on a board as a call to ministry and a call to deeper spirituality will have a significant impact on every facet of the board's operation. How membership is determined, how the group prays, how decisions are made, how folks behave during meetings, how they prepare for meetings and the priorities and expectations of individual members will be reflected in the commitment of the group and of each member of the group to personal and communal spiritual growth.

How so? A clear process for discerning membership will be in place and the necessary time will be given each year to orient and form new members. Prayer will be scriptural and reflective. Group prayer will be supported by personal prayer. Most decisions will be made by discernment and consensus, not by majority vote. There will be a respect for the opinions of others and a willingness to listen to every person's wisdom. No one member or small group will be allowed to control the group. Each member will come prepared and expect all members to do the same. Ongoing formation will be welcomed, and an annual retreat will be one of the priorities.

For Your Reflection

- How do you see the connection between being on a board, recognizing a call to ministry, and making a commitment to personal spiritual growth?
- Consider the value of processing your daily life. When is your prime time? Where is your God space? What method might work for you as you speak to God and listen for God's answer?
- How would this approach make a difference in your life? In the operation of your board?
- What help do you think you might need to become comfortable with *lectio* as a way of prayer?

Chapter 5: Discerning Membership

Jesus' invitation, "Come follow me," applies to every believer. How we follow him is a matter of personal choice based on interest, skills, insights, attraction, and grace. This obviously applies to major life choices. What profession will I prepare for? Will I marry? Whom will I marry? Will I become a priest or a religious? And then as life moves on, it comes into play again when we look at life transitions. Do I need to change directions? Try a different profession? A new location? But within the major decisions are multiple choices that have the potential to contribute to the quality of our life and the lives of those we love and for whom we are responsible. Among those are choices about how we will live out our Catholicity. In today's church there are many opportunities to serve God and God's people in ways that are personally enriching and of great assistance to the people of God. But folks must be able to make choices about such service. "Follow me!" is an invitation. Freedom to accept the invitation is based on some understanding of what will be involved.

All too often in the early years of the board movement people came on boards because the pastor or the administrator talked them into it, or even guilted them into it. They came on with unclear expectations of the role of the board or of how the board fit into the

mission of the parish. Some joined for all the wrong reasons, like wanting to control the educational program or "get" the administrator. Few had the opportunity to reflect on the roles and responsibilities they would be taking on, much less any hint of the spirituality that might be required of them. None of this was any one's fault. The concept of lay involvement was such a new idea that we simply didn't know how to go about it. The result was large doses of disillusionment on every one's part: pastors, administrators, and the generous laity who got caught in the growing pains of the movement. But that was more than 30 years ago. Now our lived experience provides us with greater clarity and the best teacher of all, the school of hard knocks! From that vantage point, then, we can explore the wisdom of using discernment as a way of determining membership and making decisions.

Some basic steps involved in identifying board membership include:

- Providing the people of the parish with adequate information about a shared wisdom model of decision making and how it is a call to holiness, ministry and serious decision making for the educational ministry of the parish
- Planning a process whereby interested folks can examine their own gifts, interests, and motives and be helped to match them with the needs of the parish
- Providing a discerning experience for those who feel themselves called
- Inviting self-nominations
- Processing the nominations
- Calling forth folks for this ministry
- Celebrating and blessing new members

How this is done and who does it will differ from parish to parish. Most often a membership committee of the board will be responsible for the logistics.

The first step, providing adequate information, will take whatever form is tried and true within the parish. This might include weekend homilies, a feature in the weekly bulletin, a letter or pam-

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phlet sent to each family, or a presentation at a parish gathering. How it is done is not important as long as the message reaches as many people as possible and invites them to consider the possibility of such a call and to pray about it.

Once people have some understanding of what membership on the board would be about, the next step is to gather those who think they might be interested. This can be done with one meeting or spread over a series of evenings.

The meeting would begin with a way for people to look at those things they enjoy doing and how well they do them. This would help them to see if they could work within the shared wisdom model. Another area of reflection would be interest in spiritual growth and a willingness to learn and work with a variety of people. Motivation would be considered. A prayerful, guided discernment would complete this part of the process. Those who continue to show interest would be given a form to fill out and return to the committee. It would ask why the person wants to be considered and what they feel they could bring to the ministry. The final selection from among those who return the form will be handled as seems best to the committee.

Making decisions by a process of discernment, as we have described it, is seeking to discover God's deepest yearnings for us. Decision making is no longer seen as just doing what we think is best but rather as a search for what God desires for us and/or for the group. In their book *Discerning God's Will Together* (The Alban Institute, 1997), Danny Morris and Charles Olsen provide a step-by-step process for arriving at a discerned decision. This process can be used for individual discernment, for example, the decision to self-nominate for board membership, or for group decision making. I quote in part from pages 92 and 93 of their book where they outline the process in the following ten steps:

Framing

Giving a clear name to the decision to be made.

Grounding

Asking what the guiding principle is in making this decision. Most often it would be the mission statement.

Shedding

Considering what preconceived ideas or wished-for outcomes will need to be let go.

Rooting

Selecting a biblical image or quote that will serve as a reminder of the holiness of the task.

Listening

Asking what voices need to be heard. Certainly all those on the board, but are there others who need to be consulted and listened to?

Exploring

Identifying possible options within the guiding principle.

Improving

"Bettering up" each option, that is, making it the best it can be.

Weighing

Considering each option for its pluses and minuses. How do I/we feel about each option? Where does the Spirit lure me/us? Spending time in prayer with each option.

Closing

Making a selection, then asking for individual responses. Are you totally in agreement? Are some concerned about part of the decision but are able to support it? Are some uneasy although they will not interfere with the implementation? Are there some who cannot support the decision at all?

It should be noted that the first three of these responses are equivalent to a consensus decision. If, however, a significant number of people cannot support the decision, the group is not ready to arrive at closure. It will be necessary to revisit the guiding principle, take time for further prayer and reflection, gather additional wisdom, or seek outside assistance. It is also possible that adjustments will need to be made in the decision.

Resting

This is a test of the heart. The question is not whether you won or lost but if you feel consolation or desolation. Consolation is quite

possible even if the decision did not go the way you had hoped it would or wanted it to. Consolation is a sign that you have indeed discerned. Desolation should raise serious doubts and bring you back to the table to try again or maybe even to drop the issue.

For Your Reflection

- How different from the way you became a member of your board is this discerning process? What do you see as a plus to doing it this way? What would be difficult?
- While making a discerned decision will probably take more time, what do you see as the benefits for such a process in the long run?
- Can you recall times in your own life when using a step-by-step method would have led you to a better decision?

Chapter 6: Group Behaviors

As the members of any group work together they will empower one another, neutralize one another, or destroy one another. Group behaviors are learned responses to situations. We use them as long as they work for us. We can change or adjust our behaviors. Most important, perhaps, we can be aware of our behaviors and judge for ourselves if we are part of creating a helpful, holy environment as the board meets. Here are some reflective questions for consideration.

Attentive Listening

Do I listen to judge?

To refute what the other is saying?

To find a place to break in to say what I want to say?

Or do I really try to hear and learn from what is being said?

Do I try to understand the other person's viewpoint?

Controlling Behaviors

Do I control the group by my silence?

My explosions?

My demands?

My withdrawal?

My tears?

The look on my face?

Allowing Consensus to Happen

What indicators do I have that my faith is in the God of this gathering?

Am I ever determined to "have it my way?"

What do I do to encourage and allow the group to arrive at a consensus decision?

What do I do that prevents or delays the group in its effort to reach consensus?

The reason for this little "examination of behaviors" is, of course, to point toward improvement. Reflection on these questions from time to time might well indicate the need for some personal changes.

For Your Reflection

- Consider the skills most needed by your board.
- What kind of training might be most helpful?

Chapter 7: Prayer as an Integral Part of Meetings

We pray in order to be available to God and to open the ears of our hearts to God's Word. Such availability is critical to the shared wisdom model if we are to hear the voice of the Spirit in our own and others' wisdom and truly discern God's deepest yearnings for us. Most groups have the custom of beginning their meetings with prayer. This might be anything from an Our Father and Hail Mary to a Scripture reading with time for reflection and perhaps sharing, followed by petitions and a closing prayer or blessing. Some groups spend two minutes in prayer, some extend it to 15 or 20. Each group must decide what best serves its needs and creates the climate for attentiveness to the Spirit.

Preparing for a meaningful prayer experience is something that is too often overlooked. Again, different groups will do it differently. Some folks really enjoy putting prayer services together. If you are gifted with such a person, be grateful. Or maybe there are two or three people who will work at this. The important thing is that someone plans the prayer and has whatever is necessary for the group to pray together. It is also helpful to create an atmosphere conducive to prayer. This is easily done with a candle, Bible, a plant, or flowers arranged in the center of the table. Such ambiance calls the group to

prayer and reminds them that there is, indeed, a holiness in what they are about to do at this meeting. The planners will need to identify a theme, develop the experience, and provide the setting and the needed materials.

Identify a Theme

Two questions are significant:

1. What will the meeting be about?

   The theme might flow from the fact that the group is meeting for a specific reason, such as:

   - To make a decision
   - To solve a problem
   - To plan a special event
   - To determine leadership
   - To approve the budget
   - To make plans for the following year
   - To evaluate its work
   - To celebrate a task well done or a person completing a term

2. Is this a feast or a special liturgical season?

   The time of year may be important:

   - Advent
   - The Christmas season
   - Lent
   - The Easter season
   - Pentecost
   - A saint's day

Whatever the theme, the prayer should flow out of one or both of these questions. Readings, songs, prayers, and rituals need to reflect the theme.

Develop the Experience

The following format is common, but it certainly can be adjusted.

Call to prayer

This is often a song or a simple greeting and response.

Scripture reading

The reading should be short and should highlight the theme.

Response to the reading

This could be a psalm, a song, silence.

Prayer

Prepared petitions, spontaneous petitions, the Our Father, a prepared or spontaneous prayer.

Closing

A song

A blessing

An exchange of peace

The Setting

Most often the prayer will take place in the same room as the meeting. Some props will be needed. These might include a Bible, a candle, music, a plant or flowers, and copies of the service or at least of the songs to be sung. Alert readers so that they are prepared and be sure that the leader makes any necessary explanations before beginning to pray.

One method that works really well is group *lectio*. It would begin with Scripture. Usually it is best to use one of the daily readings assigned for the liturgy, but other passages that fit the subject the board will be dealing with at the meeting also could be used. The method is not much different from private *lectio*. It goes like this:

Someone reads the passage rather slowly. As it is read each person listens for a word or a phrase that "jumps out."

After a short pause for personal reflection, the group members are invited to share their word or phrase. After that has been done, there

is a second reading of the passage. The instruction is to reflect on the significance of the chosen word or phrase. Again there is a short pause for reflection and then the invitation to share.

The passage is read a third time. Now it is time to reflect on what the Spirit may be asking through the chosen word or phrase. As this final reflection is shared, people are asked to pay special attention to what the person on their right says. After all have shared, the members are invited to pray aloud for the intention of that person sitting next to them.

The prayer might end with an exchange of peace, a song, or a prayer.

Some groups compose a special prayer with which they begin each meeting. One possibility is the following adaptation of Wisdom 6:12-17:

I, Wisdom, am with you.
I am a light that will never grow dim.
Love me and you will see me.
Look for me and you will find me.
In fact, at the slightest indication of your desire for me,
I will make myself known to you.
Watch for me at the very start of what you are about,
not just when things get difficult or confusing.
Be alert to me always
and you will avoid a lot of trouble.
You will find me, ever present, sitting at your
board meetings. Just thinking about my presence will help you
to develop a maturity of thought and understanding.
Be aware of my presence, my concern, my willingness
to inspire and to instruct you,
and you will be amazed at how much you will decrease
your own and everyone else's anxiety level.
I journey with you and work through you,
but also through and with those folks you come together with
to be and to build church.
As you meet with each other, I meet with each and all of you!

Having read and reflected on these words, the group might pray spontaneous petitions, or an individual might offer a prayer. Then a song to the Holy Spirit might be sung.

However the group chooses to pray, the point is to realize the need for the guidance of the Spirit and sincerely to request that guidance.

This shared wisdom model also calls for a willingness to incorporate prayer into the context of the meeting itself. Many situations will lend themselves to a few minutes of private prayer or some verbal expression of the group's need. As the saying goes, no matter what the individual's style of prayer might be, there is one prayer everyone shares. It goes like this: "Help!" Try it!

Another method of group prayer is to engage in faith sharing or theological reflection. People in ministry need to share more than just the labor that is their ministry. They need to share something of themselves — their feelings, their insights, their struggles and joys in serving God. To the degree that board members share more than ideas and concerns, they will begin to build the faith community that is called for in this shared wisdom model. And what will they share? It is especially important to share faith and experiences of living that faith.

Some people do this very easily and naturally. Others find it quite difficult. But deep down inside each of us is a desire to tell our stories — stories of pain and failure, joy and success; stories about how God touches and forms us, and walks the journey with us. Faith sharing and theological reflection are a way of doing this.

Theological reflection allows the group to take some basic concept and match it to their own experience. To make this possible and productive, materials for reflection would be given out in advance of the meeting with the agenda and with the expectation that everyone would give some preparation time to the task before coming to the meeting. One such topic might be the theology of baptism that assures us that God walks the journey with us. The reflection sheet on the following page could be used to help in the preparation.

When the group comes together to share, the key question is: "Where is the God of your lived experience and how do you come to

The God of Our Journey

As baptized Christians we have been taught that we are temples of the Holy Spirit. This translates into the comforting concept that God is ever present to us, ever available to us. However, it is all too easy to forget or ignore this remarkable gift in our daily lives. Spend some time prayerfully reflecting on the following:

- What is your experience of God's presence in your daily life?

- Do you talk to God as the day unfolds?

- Do you hear God's answers? What is your experience of God's presence in the people with whom you live life? Your family members? Your colleagues?

- Do you ever think of God's presence in folks who are difficult to get along with?

- How is (how do you recognize) God present in the circumstances of your life?
  - Does God laugh with you?
  - Cry with you?

- What helps you to be in touch with the God of your lived experience?

- What makes it difficult?

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know him?" There are no right or wrong answers, no agreeing or disagreeing. Everyone listens respectfully, grateful for the willingness of people to speak so honestly. It may seem appropriate at the conclusion of such a session to ask for comments on what folks may have learned. Or it may be best to sit quietly for a short period of time and conclude with a brief prayer or a song of thanksgiving.

Scriptural reflection is another way of sharing self. It will begin with a passage from the Bible. The story of the wedding feast at Cana would be a good place to start. After the story has been read, the group leader might simply say, "Let us consider how Jesus takes the water that is our human frailty and turns it into his wine." After a few minutes of silence, those who wish to share their thoughts with the group are invited to do so. This experience should not be rushed and not everyone should be expected to share, at least not at first. As with faith sharing, there is no right or wrong response. The appropriate stance is one of respectful listening.

Such experiences serve to bond the group. They also provide each member with insights about the other members. These insights in turn help members understand why people take the positions they take or have the fears and concerns they have. They also encourage members to be patient and compassionate with one another and allow for the possibility of calling each other to new places of growth.

Such experiences obviously are time consuming. Are they to be part of the regular meeting? Not likely. Which takes us to our next consideration: ongoing formation and in-service. But a few questions first.

For Your Consideration

- Are you willing to commit to a prayerful approach to board gatherings? How would such a commitment change your meetings?
- Might you be willing to assist in the planning of prayer experiences?
- What difference would all of this make to the quality of your meetings?

Chapter 8: Nurturing the Spirit

A shared wisdom model of church will not happen—automatically or because we desire it to happen—without training and prayer. As ongoing formation and in-service are expected of the professional minister, so they should be expected of everyone called to the ministry of boards.

Each board needs a plan that will provide the following for all members:

- An understanding of the school's mission and philosophy
- A way to internalize that mission and philosophy
- Good meeting skills
- Techniques for forums and consultations
- Conflict management skills
- Evaluation skills
- Public relation techniques

Many board members may be well versed in such things and it will be just a matter of reminding them about skills and procedures with which they are already familiar. But such skill formation should not be taken for granted or ignored. The same is true for faith forma-

tion. There needs to be a continual program that includes prayer experiences, sharing of faith stories, and input on spirituality.

Most groups accomplish this by having an annual retreat day. It is best if such a day can be scheduled away from the parish, perhaps at a local retreat center. The day might include appropriate input, prayer and sharing, a Eucharistic celebration, time for quiet reflection, some skill development, and a simple meal. Some groups invite their spouses to join them for the Eucharist and the meal.

And have a party now and then! Jesus modeled a spirit of celebration that we too often overlook. He was into parties. Recall the wedding feast, the picnics he hosted, his dinner party, the fish fry by the lake, and his willingness to stop at the end of the day for a snack with his friends. The willingness of board members to celebrate who they are and what they are about is a necessity for the development of a faith community. Such activities reflect the group members' understanding of the Good News and are signs of the joy with which they are committed to being and building church!

For Your Reflection

- What kinds of prayer experiences have you had as a group?
- What else might be needed? How could you support one another in sharing and in being willing to give time to an annual retreat day?
- Does your board party together? If not, would you be willing to assist in planning such a gathering?

Some Final Thoughts

The ideas and challenges I have shared with you in these pages are by no means easily accomplished. Being a member of a board is a challenge, an opportunity for personal growth, an invitation to nourish and strengthen church, a call to deeper and deeper spirituality, and a way to serve the parish by assuring the education of the next generation of Catholic Christians. May you take up this challenge with sincerity and joy, prayerfully and faithfully. And may the God of the gathering be always present to you, and the God of your lived experience continue to walk every journey with you!

All Bible quotations are from *The Revised English Bible,* Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press.

About the Author

Sister Mary Benet McKinney, a member of the St. Scholastica Benedictine Monastery in Chicago, has been involved in education for more than 50 years. She has been a teacher and administrator in Chicago Catholic schools and served for 10 years in the Chicago Catholic school office. During those years she ministered primarily to board members, principals, and pastors in more than 350 Catholic parish schools.

She did her undergraduate work at De Paul University, earned her Masters in Educational Administration and Supervision from Loyola University, and her Doctor of Ministry from St. Mary of the Lake Seminary in Mundelein, Illinois. It was during her studies at the seminary that she developed the shared wisdom model for which she is well known.

As a consultant for church systems, a facilitator of discernment, and director of retreats and missions, Sister McKinney travels throughout the country as well as in New Zealand, Australia, and Canada, working with parishes, dioceses, school systems, and religious communities.

She is the author of *Sharing Wisdom: A Process for Group Decision-Making* and co-author with Thomas Sweetser, SJ, of *Changing Pastors*. She also publishes in educational, pastoral, and religious journals and is a frequent speaker at NCEA conventions.

"*Learners and Leaders: Spirituality for Board Members* is an excellent resource for ongoing board formation. It takes the call to board ministry to a deeper level. Sister Mary Benet offers a wealth of challenging and practical processes and reflections for service as a board member, all of which ultimately enhance the spiritual life of the members, the school, and the church."
Mary Michaeline Green, OP
Superintendent of Schools
Diocese of Baton Rouge, Louisiana

"Sister Mary Benet has developed a practical manual for boards using the three critical foundation blocks of spirituality, ministry, and discernment. It will undoubtedly help to move faith from the prayer time into the whole decision making process."
Loughlan Sofield, S.T.
Senior Editor of Human Development and co-author of Collaboration: Uniting Our Gifts in Ministry *(Ave Maria Press 2000)*

"Sister Mary Benet shares her wide experience of directing retreats and facilitating discernment for groups in a book that reflects on the lay vocation expressed in board membership. This book is both practical and seriously concerned with spirituality in a context in which it is all too easy to separate these dimensions from each other."
Dr. Monika Hellwig
Executive Director
Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities

National Association of Boards, Commissions, and
Councils of Catholic Education
of the

National Catholic Educational Association
1077 30th Street, NW, Suite 100
Washington, DC 20007-3852
(202) 337-6232

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